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ABSTRACT

A program was developed at the University of Pittsburgh to improve the English language proficiency of foreign teaching assistants (TA's) in order to alleviate communication problems between them and the undergraduates in their classes. Three aspects of the program are described: (1) interdepartmental procedures, (2) testing procedures, and (3) objectives of the special speaking class. First, the program is coordinated by the dean, and carried out by the English Language Institute. The final decisions are made by the department in which the TA is majoring. Secondly, the testing process is a structured oral interview in which the major criterion of assessment is pragmatic effectiveness. The interview is taped and rated by several persons including an undergraduate in a manner similar to the Foreign Service Institute oral interview. Finally, the special speaking course, offered once a year, has two objectives, namely, to improve comprehensibility and fluency as well as listening comprehension, and to provide the TA's with a cultural orientation to the American college classroom and the typical undergraduate. The program includes pronunciation work, a variety of speaking activities, and some instruction in effective classroom techniques. Appendices include the oral-English rating sheet and several speaking activities. (AMH)

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IMPROVING THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF FOREIGN TEACHING ASSISTANTS

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INTRODUCTION

For 5 years the University of Pittsburgh has been developing a program to deal with the problem of low English proficiency among some of the international Teaching Assistants. In response to the complaints of undergraduate students about their instructors' communication difficulties, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (Graduate School) initiated and now directs the program which is administered by the English Language Institute, Department of General Linguistics. Our evaluation procedures and special courses for the foreign TA's have been revised every year, and we expect that this process of refining will continue. The purpose of this presentation is simply to outline our program in order

a) to share our experience with those of you beginning such a program, and

b) to get some suggestions from those of you who have similar programs in operation.

This paper is in three main sections.

I Interdepartmental procedures

II Testing procedures

III Objectives of the special speaking class

I. COORDINATION BETWEEN DEPARTMENTS, ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTITUTE AND THE FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES DEAN'S OFFICE.

The Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) coordinates all the administrative aspects of the screening and teaching of the foreign TA's. It was from the Office of the Dean that the original impetus came to do something about the problem - no doubt because it was that office which had to deal with complaints from dissatisfied students. The system of screening and teaching described in this paper could not operate with-

out of the strong support of the Dean. Over the last few years the functions of the Dean have evolved into the following:

(i) The Dean informs new TA's that they are required to attend an interview test.

(ii) The Dean supplies a list of students to be tested by the Testing Supervisor of the English Language Institute (ELI).

(iii) The Dean requests Departments to arrange interview times for the TA's and to supply assistant interviewers, subject area specialists, usually the Professor responsible for Departmental TA orientation and an American undergraduate.

(iv) The Dean monitors the regular testing evaluations that are made of all TA's by their students at the end of each term. These evaluations contain two questions referring to communicative effectiveness.

(vi) The Dean informs TA's of the results of their screening interviews and the student evaluations of their teaching; either they need no help with English, or they are required to attend a special class for TA's (Linguistics 8A, 3 credits), or they are required to receive individual tutoring.

The contribution of the TA's major Departments to their linguistic screening and training is minimal, aside from supplying the assistants in the interview test. However, it is the Departments that make final decisions about whether the TA's will be given teaching assignments or whether they will be given tasks, such as grading papers and tests, that do not involve spoken interactions with American students. Departmental decisions do not normally conflict with the outcome of the interview tests; only those TA's who need no help with English or those who need some individual tutoring are given teaching assignments.

The ELI's contribution is to run the testing, through its Testing Supervisor, and to provide the special class in spoken English that is designed for foreign TA's.

From time to time the Dean calls a meeting of a committee that is responsible for seeing that the testing and teaching of the foreign TA's is continuing in the most effective possible way. The committee consists of the Dean, the chairpersons of Linguistics and of Speech and Theatre Arts the ELI's Testing Supervisor, and representatives from the Departments mainly involved (Physics, Chemistry, Computer Science, Mathematics and Economics).

II. THE TESTING PROCEDURE

The test consists of a structured interview in which the TA is rated on a 25 point scale made up of 5 components - each being worth 5 points (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension; see Appendix I The scale is from Testing English as a Second Language by David P. Harris (McGraw Hill, 1969). The structured interview procedure is similar to that of the Foreign Service Institute Oral Interview, but is shorter, simpler and does not use differential weighting in the components.

Each component of the scale, which is of the Likert type, has five levels which parallel each other across components. The highest level, worth 5 points, is almost equivalent to native speakers' proficiency whilst the lowest, worth one point, means the speech is virtually unintelligible; the remaining three levels are evenly distributed between these extremes. The descriptors are designed to reflect these levels by relating them to linguistic aspects of each component. The scores for each component are summed to give an overall rating out of 25. When appropriate, comments are added.

A typical interview lasts about 15 minutes and is audiotaped for later

later review, if necessary, or for use in teaching. The Testing Supervisor leads the interviewing and has previously given the assistant interviewers an orientation to the procedure. These are the usual sequences:

1. Testing Supervisor calls TA into interview room and introduces the assisting interviewers.

2. Testing Supervisor explains purpose of interview, even though the TA already knows it, to provide some settling down time for the TA. The introductions and simple interchange of information at this point already yield some useful clues to the TA's speaking competence.

3. Testing Supervisor asks some simple questions of a 'social' type (when arrived in USA, finding an apartment, etc.), which establish initial impressions of listening comprehension and productive competence in a question answering mode.

4. Testing Supervisor asks for a description of the TA's English language learning background, with special emphasis on opportunities to practice speaking and listening with native speakers of English.

5. Testing Supervisor asks for a description of any previous teaching experience.

6. Assisting interviewers then ask about the TA's main interest within the discipline and about specific plans, if any, for graduate research projects.

7. Assisting interviewers then select any simple concept from the TA's main interest within the subject and set up a role-play in which the TA must explain the concept to the interviewers, who become the class of 'undergraduates'. The TA is asked to use the blackboard in the explanation.

8. The interview is concluded when the interviewers feel they have heard enough to judge from. Each interviewer is free to extend the interview by asking additional questions at the end.

At the end of the interview, the Testing Supervisor and assistants independently complete a rating sheet for each TA. Their scores are not averaged. The Testing Supervisor and Dean of FAS then go through the set

scores to determine which category (class or tutoring or no help) each TA falls into. The majority of cases are clear-cut. In borderline cases, the TA is generally not given the benefit of the doubt. Someone on the tutoring/class borderline is usually required to take the class; someone on the no help/tutoring borderline is usually required to receive tutoring. This is in line with the aim of the whole procedure: to head off potential problems before they become real problems of communication in the classroom. In all the borderline cases, the pronunciation scores are given more scrutiny. Any TA with a '3' in this category is regarded as needing tutoring, if not already assigned to the 3 credit class. The approximate cut-off points are as follows:

21-25: No help needed with English before beginning to teach, unless low in the Pronunciation component (3 or less out of 5) or unless there is some other problems (such as the staccato English speech rhythms of many Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan TA's)

19-20: Individual tutoring and language laboratory work to improve specific weaknesses

16 and below: Must attend the advanced ESL speaking class for TA's, Linguistics 8A

Some comments on the test procedure

This procedure may be characterized as a performance test of speaking ability in which the major criterion of assessment is pragmatic effectiveness. The approach is essentially holistic - a general impression of speaking skill as judged by competent (native speaker) testers - but also, to a large extent, analytic (influenced by discrete point testing). It is holistic because each of the 5 components is judged by general impression on interviewers and not by a procedure that produces numbers in a mechanical

way (such as in a multiple choice test); it is analytic because the skill is broken down into 5 components each of which is separately, though holistically, scored.

Although no formal measurement of the procedure's reliability and validity has been made, the following points may be noted:

1. Reliability is increased by having more than one rater.

2. Validity is increased by having one rater an undergraduate who potentially could be taught by the TA.

3. Validity is increased by including the role-play of a teaching situation, since this simulates the socio-linguistic context of the classroom. Using the black-board while explaining something can make all the difference to some of the TA's who are more effective in this way than in a straightforward conversational situation.

4. Taping the interview provides the opportunity to play back interviews if any of the interviewers are in doubt about a particular score, thus improving reliability.

5. Any kind of interview is of course more reliable and valid for this purpose, testing of speaking, than any number of TOEFL and Michigan scores.

6. The test is not intended as a measure of teaching effectiveness, but only of speaking effectiveness. Just as native speakers of English are not necessarily effective teachers, the TA's may not be. Often, however, it is difficult for a struggling undergraduate to distinguish between difficult material, poor teaching and a foreign accent. So, while every complaint is taken seriously, it is not automatically assumed that the TA's accent in such a case is the problem. The interview remains a valid procedure if this is borne in mind.

7. Taping the interview does introduce an 'unreal' element, therefore decreasing validity, but it does increase the reliability (as noted in point 4 above). Also it may be argued that any nervousness induced in the TA by the presence of the technical equipment is likely to be less than that induced by a classful of expectant students. As is any

test, there is a degree of artificiality that must be accepted because of gains that the artificiality allows.

III. Objectives of the special speaking class

There are two major objectives for the special speaking course offered once a year for the international TA's. The first is the improvement of comprehensibility and fluency as well as listening comprehension. Most of the TA's in this course have difficulty not only in expressing themselves but also in comprehending what is said to them. The second objective is to provide the TA's with a cultural orientation to the American college classroom and the typical undergraduate. By feeling comfortable in the classroom or laboratory and knowing what to expect of his/her undergraduate students, the foreign TA may be able to compensate for misunderstandings caused by language weaknesses. The undergraduates may be willing to tolerate some communication difficulties if the instructor seems at ease and therefore in control of the situation.

Pronunciation problems are dealt with inside and outside the classroom during this course. At the beginning of the term, all the students tape-record a diagnostic examination as a record of their beginning level. The instructor goes over the results with the students individually, so that they know exactly which segments and intonation patterns they should practice during the term. The final grade in the course is partly determined by the students' progress in comprehensibility. During class, about 20 minutes per week is spent in oral drilling of segments and stress and intonation patterns which are generally troublesome. Since most of the students enrolled in the course speak Chinese, Korean or Japanese, many of the problems are quite predictable. In addition, weekly language

laboratory assignments include individualized assignments for pronunciation practice.

Besides the drilling in which the students can usually produce relatively comprehensible and correct words, phrases or sentences, the students are evaluated on their comprehensibility for all their major presentations and activities. The teacher compares their oral production in these exercises to the record of their first taping and indicates to them whether they are making satisfactory progress or not.

The curriculum includes a variety of speaking activities to provide a context for speaking in class. Since our major concern is preparing these students for teaching academic classes, most of the activities are school-related. One type of exercise is problem-solving (see Appendix 2). The students are given a realistic situation and must come to some decision as to how to handle it. The students are divided into small groups which must report back to the whole class on their unanimous conclusion. The group work provides an opportunity for all the students to speak in English - especially if more than 1 language group is represented in each group. After each group has given its solution to the problem, the class discusses the typical American solution. In the case of this particular problem, last year's class did not know what would be expected of them even though they were to be proctors in up-coming mid-term exams. It provided a good basis for discussion and information-sharing.

Another successful activity is role-playing. Most of the students in this course are sensitive about speaking, but they often venture much more when they are given a role to play. The roleplay (see Appendix 3)

handout created a number of outspoken American TA's out of reticent foreign TA's. Most of the students seemed to appreciate getting such issues out in the open, so that they would know how to react, and could bring up problems they had already encountered themselves.

In addition to such interactive activities, each of the TA's has to make a number of individual presentations to the class. One was not strictly related to school-work but received good reviews in the end-of-term evaluations (see Appendix 4). Pairs of students give reports on a topic related to life in Pittsburgh and on campus. Since most of the students have received very little orientation to the city and campus, the information is useful, and many questions are asked. One requirement of this exercise is that the students tell the teacher their American source of information, so that they are forced to actually talk to someone in English. The other presentations during the term are connected to the students' own fields and involve the teaching of some point which they might have to teach in undergraduate recitations or lab sections. At least one of these is videotaped and reviewed individually with the instructor. Since very few of them have ever seen themselves on video-tape, it is an eye-opening experience. During the private sessions the instructor goes over the language problems as well as the student's teaching techniques.

Many of the TA's have had minimal teaching experience in their own language, so tips on effective classroom techniques are included in preparing the students to make these presentations. Most of the departments at the University of Pittsburgh with large numbers of foreign TA's have started obligatory teacher-training seminars; therefore, this topic is

not dwelt on in much depth. However, strategies for understanding students' questions or for making difficult-to-pronounce words comprehensible are discussed both in class and during the individual conferences. Listening comprehension activities are assigned for language laboratory work outside class.

In hope of preparing the foreign TA's for the English that they will encounter in the classroom, a vocabulary component is also included in the curriculum. So far we have used idiom texts: KEY To English: Two-Word Verbs (Collier-Macmillan, 1964). The results have not been very good, so this year the students will be responsible for collecting expressions and bringing them to class. This should make their vocabulary reflect their colleagues' usage and will force them to listen to more English more carefully.

The second major objective of the course is to acclimate the foreign TA's to the culture of the American university. This includes such diverse topics as address forms, how to show respect and the differences between shame and guilt cultures. Generally, the students have very low tolerance for such topics of discussion. They have not actually been in the U.S. long enough to realize any but the most superficial cultural differences they will have to deal with. Since the students have little to contribute, the instructor tends to talk a lot. This year we intend to incorporate a publication advertised in the NAFSA Newsletter: Manual for Foreign Teaching Assistants by Gary Althen (University of Iowa, 1981).

By far the weakest part of this course is the lack of practice these students have in actually talking to naive native speakers. In spite of

the interactive activities and the presentations, there is nothing that prepares them directly for the experience of dealing personally with the undergraduate students. Last year, we were able to split the class into even smaller groups once a week because we have one more staff member who was assigned to the foreign TA's for half of his TF. This was an improvement, but still not a substitute for real-life practice.

The American TF just mentioned was actually a tutor for those foreign TA's who still needed some special attention but not a speaking course. These TA's each received 2 hours of individual tutoring - 1 hour before mid-term and 1 hour at the end of term. The first hour is intended as a diagnostic session, in which the TA is told what he needs to practice and is introduced to available Language Laboratory materials for individual practice. The second hour is an evaluation of the TA's progress. Each one is video-taped, and persisting problems are discussed.

At the end of the term, the progress of both groups of TA's - those in the special class and those being tutored - is reported to the Dean. The departments are notified so that assignments for the next term can be made. The TA's in the special class generally receive another term of tutoring before they begin to teach, or in some departments they team-teach a laboratory section with an American TA.

APPENDIX I

Oral-English Rating Sheet

Name: _____ Dept.: _____ Date: _____

Pronunciation

___5. Has few traces of foreign accent.
___4. Always intelligible, though one is conscious of a definite accent.
___3. Pronunciation problems necessitate concentrated listening and occasionally lead to misunderstanding.
___2. Very hard to understand because of pronunciation problems. Must frequently be asked to repeat.
___1. Pronunciation problems so severe as to make speech virtually unintelligible.

Grammar

___5. Makes few (if any) noticeable errors of grammar or word order.
___4. Occasionally makes grammatical and/or word-order errors which do not, however, obscure meaning.
___3. Makes frequent errors of grammar and word order which occasionally obscure meaning.
___2. Grammar and work-order errors make comprehension difficult. Must often rephrase sentences and/or restrict himself to basic patterns.
___1. Errors in grammar and word order so severe as to make speech virtually unintelligible.

Vocabulary

___5. Use of vocabulary and idioms is virtually that of a native speaker.
___4. Sometimes uses inappropriate terms and/or must rephrase ideas because of lexical inadequacies.
___3. Frequently uses the wrong words; conversation somewhat limited because of inadequate vocabulary.
___2. Misuse of words and very limited vocabulary make comprehension quite difficult.
___1. Vocabulary limitations so extreme as to make conversation virtually impossible.

Fluency

___5. Speech as fluent and effortless as that of a native speaker.
___4. Speed of speech seems to be slightly affected by language problems.
___3. Speed and fluency are rather strongly affected by language problems.
___2. Usually hesitant; often forced into silence by language limitations.
___1. Speech is so halting and fragmentary as to make conversation virtually impossible.

Comprehension

___5. Appears to understand everything without difficulty.
___4. Understands nearly everything at normal speed, although occasional repetition may be necessary.
___3. Understands most of what is said at slower-than-normal speed with repetitions.
___2. Has great difficulty following what is said. Can comprehend only "social conversation" spoken slowly and with frequent repetitions.
___1. Cannot be said to understand even simple conversational English.

Score (25): Rater(s):

Comments:

Appendix 2: Problem-Solving

Situation:

One of your responsibilities as a TA in your department involves proctoring an exam in the introductory course for freshmen. The class is large, and you are assigned to watch a particular section of students in the exam room. You notice one student who looks rather suspicious, for he is moving around in his seat and seems to be looking up and down instead of concentrating on the test. Finally, you see that he has a sheet of paper full of information which he is using to cheat on the exam (a crib sheet). What are you going to do? He knows that you saw him cheating.

1. ignore him
2. take his paper and give him an F on the test
3. let him finish the test but tell the professor what happened
4. take his crib sheet and let him finish the test
5. don't say anything until you meet him outside of class and then tell him not to do it again
6. other suggestions????

Appendix 3: Roleplay

The Staff Meeting

The Biology Department at Dalton University has a large undergraduate enrollment. Most of the lab classes and recitation sections are taught by TA's. The TA's in the Biology Department are from the U.S. and abroad, and recently the Chairman of the department has received a number of complaints about the poor English of the foreign TA's. The TA population of this department is made up of approximately 1/3 Americans and 2/3 foreigners, so that some of the foreigners must teach. The Chairman has to balance the demands of the teaching schedule and the available TA's with the complaints of the undergraduates whose tuition entitles them to courses which allow them to learn.

Situation:

Dr. Robertson, the faculty member who is responsible for TA supervision, is in the process of making up the Winter Term teaching schedules. He has called a meeting of TA's in order to hear their preferences and suggestions. He must assign all TA's to

a) a lab section (to assign and explain experiments and assist the students in the lab)
b) a recitation group (to assign homework problems and go over them with the students in class)
or c) a job as "homework correcter" or equipment supervisor (with minimal student contact)

There should be 2 people for each job.

Participants:

1. Dr. Robertson: faculty member in charge of TA supervision and work assignments.

   Dr. Robertson considers it very important that all TA's have a variety of experience as teachers. He encourages everyone to try each job. For him, foreign TA's should be treated the same as Americans, and his philosophy on teaching extends to their assignments, too. However, the Chairman has told him to be careful about the "English problem".

2. Bob: American TA

   Bob enjoys teaching and wants to continue to teach in the lab. He has taught lab classes for 4 terms and has little class preparation time now as a result. If he has to change, it will mean much more time and effort for his TA duties.

3. John: American TA

   John has been teaching in recitation groups. He really doesn't like to teach, and he thinks that it is much more work than correcting papers or tending the equipment. John thinks that it is unfair that the Americans have more teaching assignments than the foreigners. He thinks that he has to work much harder for the same money.

4. Foreign TA

This TA has been in the US for 1 year. He hates to teach and is only interested in doing research. His English skills are not too bad - he would be capable of handling an assignment which involves contact with American students. He only wants to correct papers or to tend the equipment as he has been doing for 1 year.

5. Foreign TA

This TA has been in the US for 1 year. So far, he corrected papers for 2 terms and taught 1 term of lab. By the time he had to teach, his English was adequate, and he could handle most (not all) student questions. He thinks that it is necessary for new foreigners to have 2 terms without too much student contact. After that, he felt comfortable enough to teach. He is willing to do anything Dr. Robertson assigns him.

6. Foreign TA

This TA is new this academic year. His English scores were very good, but his oral/aural skills are rather poor. He feels uncomfortable talking to Americans and wants to avoid any situation where he must talk to groups of students. He hopes that his assignments will always be without any student contact. However, he plans to be a university instructor when he returns to his country. For Fall Term he was assigned to tend the equipment.

7. Foreign TA

This TA is new this academic year. His English abilities are above average, but he was assigned to grading papers during his first term. Some of his fellow TA's have some difficulty understanding him, but he has been practicing as much as possible. He has some teaching experience in his country and intends to teach when he returns.

Appendix 4

INFORMATION-GATHERING ASSIGNMENT: Eating Out/Food shopping

1. What food services are open in the University? (Where are they? What type of food is available? How much does a meal cost? What is the university meal plan? Which eating places can be recommended?)

2. What "fast-food" restaurants are located in the University area? (Where are they located? Ask 8-10 Americans which fast-food restaurants they think are the best.)

3. If you want a nice meal, what restaurants near the University can be recommended? (Name, location, type of food, price range)

4. Which grocery store chains do business in Pittsburgh? Ask 5 Americans which store they prefer, and why.

5. What is a food co-op? Where's the nearest one?